

torium would be his most advantageous position, but he did not attempt the passage behind the boxes. The stifling sensation he had experienced there was fresh in his mind. From the first he had instinctively shrunk from the place.

WITHOUT a sound he clambered over the footlights and felt his way softly up the aisle. He drew back the cover from a chair and sat down. It was the best he could do. If an alarm should come—which seemed wholly unreasonable—he could conceal himself between the seats; he could move the length of the row beneath the protecting cloth.

He took the flashlight from his overcoat and held it ready in his left hand. He kept his right hand in his pocket, fingering the revolver. He waited, oppressed by the darkness, straining his ears to the silence.

Almost at once he doubted the wisdom of the experiment. His imagination was too lively. Constantly it evaded his control. The black building seemed crowded, as if its memories had refused to depart and at this hour disturbed the night with a positive but impalpable activity. A feeling of malevolence near by grew upon him. The perfumed air became poisonous in his lungs. His breath was shorter. A sense of expectancy increased. In spite of his precautions, the building might hold something—

He sprang erect. A quiet sound, like a breeze over water, had set the darkness in motion, grew in volume until it resembled a riotous wind, then snapped back into the sodden silence.

He slipped the revolver from his pocket. He weighed it doubtfully in his palm. Of what use could that be? Even after the sudden noise, his reason told him that the house was empty.

Quaile stiffened. Little by little, he raised the revolver. He turned warily, so that he faced the pall toward the rear of the house. More startled than he had been by the tempestuous sound, he strained his eyes to penetrate the pall. Through the stillness he had received an assurance that he was no longer alone. Somebody, something, stared at him from back there—something for whom the night could construct no barrier, something that forced upon him the imminence of a unique danger.

STUBBORNLY he tried to tell himself it was fancy; but the sensation of a calm and malevolent regard did not weaken. Then a new sound reached him—the sound of a man walking with a difficult limp: and it came from the dress circle which he had recently searched—which a moment ago he would have sworn was empty.

The one who had stared must have stood at the balcony railing, appraising him who, perhaps, was the real intruder in this desolation.

The steps receded toward the top of the gallery. They turned there in the direction of the stairs, and after a moment were shambling down, as if each forward movement marked the conquest of a supreme pain. Soon he knew they were on the orchestra floor with him, were dragging along his aisle. Doubtless because of their nearness, another step, scarcely more than a mental perception, now filled the intervals between their progress. It was the subdued approach of a cat close behind the limping feet.

Taken with his remembrance of that first day, it was the final proof. Dolly was right. Of course, she had always been right.

Quaile waited hypnotically. There was a fascination about this unseen advance, which continued with a measured and unguessable purposeness.

Steadily the limping steps came nearer. The feline pattering grew more clearly audible. He would wait until both were close before flashing his light.

In a moment now—for the footsteps did not vary. If he reached out through the darkness—

He raised the revolver. He pointed the lamp.

"Now! Who are you?"

The words burst forth involuntarily as he snapped the control of the lamp.

The sharp click cut across the black air, but the blackness was not altered. No shaft of light tore through.

With a feverish haste he snapped the control again and again, recalling the fresh battery he had seen inserted, remembering how short a time before he had depended on its brilliance for his search.

The footsteps, unhurrying, limped down the aisle, crossed at the bottom, and entered the narrow passage behind the boxes. There they ceased.

The useless cylinder slipped from Quaile's fingers to the floor and rolled beneath the seats. Without its light he was helpless. The realization conquered his passionate disappointment. Moreover, he could not doubt that whatever had passed him was, through some unnatural means, responsible for the lamp's failure.

Already the warning of the night before was sufficiently justified. There was no virtue in remaining to combat an enemy that could render useless any material attack or defense he might devise. He had followed McHugh's wishes and his own logic. He had given the supernatural every chance. His logic had for the present been defeated. There was nothing to do but go, if he could; for his confidence had not survived the last few moments unscathed.

Perhaps silence was no longer of value, but he felt his way cautiously along the shrouded seats and tiptoed across the orchestra pit. He raised his hands to climb to the stage.

HE drew back slowly, with a choking throat. His hands had touched canvas. Since his entrance the curtain had been lowered. He could not doubt that his escape had been cut off, save through the stifling passage from which he had always shrunk, where the footsteps had stopped, as if whatever was responsible waited for him.

He cursed the foresight that had made McHugh fasten the doors at the front; for it was impossible to remain here without light, constantly aware of a companionship that could not rationally exist, but of whose actual presence he had had too much confirmation.

He told himself that the limping thing in the passage was no more than human. Armed with his revolver, he had no fear of a man. For an instant the prospect of a physical struggle stimulated him. He groped his way to the entrance, and, his revolver extended before him, stepped into the passage.

Immediately he knew he was not alone. All at once the footsteps strayed close at hand. The purring of a cat was in his ears.

He pushed the darkness back angrily and took a step forward. Then he paused, recognizing the uselessness of ordinary courage. His way was barred—but not by a man.

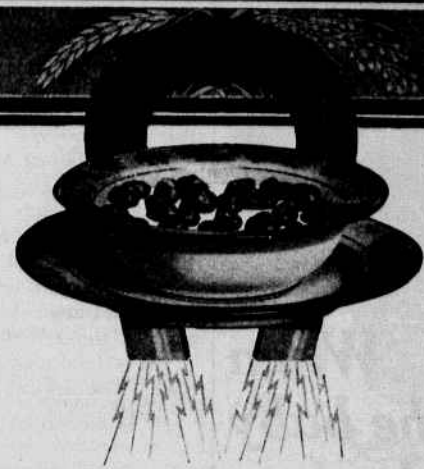
There was something scarcely illuminative but like light in the passage—a half-seen radiance which gathered before him. It faded—it strengthened again. He could not fight that. He shrank back. The footsteps were closer. The purring was more contented. He thought that the nebulous light began roughly to assume the lines of a figure. Blind rage drowned calculation. He pointed his revolver at the impossible thing.

"Look out," he muttered. "I'm going to shoot."

He pulled the trigger. The explosion deafened him. It filled the passage with a choking, pungent smoke. But the bullet altered nothing. The footsteps did not alter. The purring increased. Behind the veil of smoke the pallid light grew.

Quaile lowered his arm with the revolver. He shrank against the wall, protecting his eyes with his arm, helpless, no longer able to doubt that the ghastly light was with an extreme rapidity gathering shape to attack him.

To be continued next week



THE MAGNET

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